

Fikret
AMIROV

One Thousand and One Nights
Symphony 'To the Memory of Nizami'



Kyiv Virtuosi Symphony Orchestra
Dmitry Yablonsky

Fikret Amirov (1922–1984)

Symphony 'To the Memory of Nizami' • One Thousand and One Nights – Suite

Together with Kara Karayev (1918–1982, also spelt Gara Garayev), Fikret Amirov (1922–1984) is probably Azerbaijan's best-known composer in the classical tradition. His music draws deeply on Azerbaijani folk traditions – he was the son of Mashadi Jamil Amirov, a composer himself and a well-known *khanande*, a singer of *mugam* (this being a complex modal system, known in the Arabic world as *maqam*). He began composing very early, principally for piano, and was later educated at the State Conservatoire in Baku, studying under the Russian Boris Zeidman (1908–1981, himself a pupil of Maximilian Steinberg) and Uzeyir Hajibeyov (1885–1948), considered the founder of Azerbaijani composed classical music, and the author of the country's national anthem.

Amirov studied and collected Azerbaijani folk music, together with other composers, from 1930 onwards, and invented the 'symphonic mugam', based on traditional folk melodies. His music is, in fact, shot through with Azerbaijani folklore, though it is processed through the kind of socialist realist orchestral writing that one would naturally expect of a composer working at this time. Two works in the 'symphonic mugam' genre are amongst his most frequently performed: *Shur* (1946) and *Kürd Ovshari* (1949), as is the *Azerbaijan Capriccio* (1961). There are also two operas, *The Seagull* (1948) and *Sevil* (originally composed in 1953), and the ballets *The Legend of Nasimi* (1977) and *One Thousand and One Nights* (1979).

Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) from the ancient city of Ganga, Azerbaijan, is one of the most celebrated Muslim poets, who reformulated the style of epic poetry, making it more realistic. His work has been highly influential in several countries, including Iran, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. Amirov interested himself in the broader culture of this region, as both *To the Memory of Nizami* and *One Thousand and One Nights* prove. Indeed, before composing the latter, which is also known as *Arabian Nights*, he made trips to Iraq, Yemen and Egypt, bringing back recordings of music from those countries.

Amirov's *Symphony* dedicated to Nizami was written in 1941, the 800th anniversary of the writer's birth. Scored for string orchestra, it is intended to be a portrait of the man and his character as philosopher and poet. As so often in Amirov's work, a leitmotif is employed, a melodic tag that serves to identify Nizami, based on Azerbaijani material. The work's first movement, *Allegro maestoso*, is the longest of the four, and sets the tone immediately, with a sombre, mysterious introduction that is immediately followed by brighter contrasting material. While Amirov's string writing, making full use of the colouristic possibilities of the ensemble, suggests not only composers of the generation of Reinhold Glière, but from even earlier: it is not too fanciful to hear distant echoes of Rimsky-Korsakov in his work, and like Rimsky-Korsakov, Amirov was able to blend folk material seamlessly into his very Western/Soviet understanding of orchestral colour and texture.

The second movement, *Allegretto giocoso*, suggests an oriental dance, and makes much use of different kinds of articulations – pizzicato (plucking rather than bowing the strings), various kinds of accents, and so on. Though it is extremely concise, we find Amirov here at his very best, conceiving of music as though it were a single arch. The third movement, *Andante molto sostenuto*, is very different, dramatically nostalgic or even lamenting in tone, but still somewhat dance-like in character, and invested with all the emotional weight traditionally given to strings, and, once again, a lot is said in a short space. The movement ends with a mysterious ascent into the stratosphere that one might describe as an apotheosis.

With the colourful fourth movement, *Allegro con brio*, we seem to be given another aspect of Nizami's character, forceful and imposing. Its oriental colouring does not prevent the listener from sensing, once again, its technical ancestry in Russian composers of the 19th century, but this is precisely part of Amirov's approach and his originality.

With the ballet *One Thousand and One Nights*, we are in the kind of fantastic world that Amirov was so skilful

at evoking. The original ballet was in two acts, following a libretto based on the well-known collection of folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age by Magsud Ibrahimbeyov and Rustam Ibragimbekov, who developed the work alongside the choreographer Naila Nazirova and artist Togrul Narimanbekov. It was first seen at the Azerbaijan State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre in 1979. The *Suite* derived from the complete ballet is organised in twelve sections, the first of which, *Introduction: Orgy* throws us immediately into the seductive Orient, with insistent percussion and blazing orchestral writing. This is followed by two brief scenes, *Shahriar's Anger* and *Execution*, in which percussion again plays a significant role. Such illustrative skill is at the heart of this ballet, in fact; examples are numerous, but particularly impressive are *Sheherazade's Love Theme*, which moves from the dreamily romantic to the hypnotic, by means of the use of ostinato, to suggest her telling of the tales over the thousand and one nights; the exuberant *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, coloured by tubular bells and timpani, and the affecting *Sadness of Sheherazade*, in which the future queen's emotions are evoked by the simplest of means, and the solo violin will naturally evoke the name of Rimsky-Korsakov once again: reminiscences of the Russian composer's own work on this subject would be difficult to avoid.

Amirov also obligingly provides us with a film-like *Chase* (it is no surprise that he also wrote for the cinema) and a memorably triumphant evocation of Shahriar's falling in love with Sheherazade, while the brass and woodwind of the *Finale* suggest the kind of celebratory dance that one would expect after such adventures.

As the musicologist Aida Huseynova has written in her remarkable history of Azerbaijani music, '[Gara] Garayev and Amirov ... expanded the stylistic and semantic scope of Azerbaijani music in space and time, adding the voices of other cultures and exploring various ways of synthesising national idioms with earlier and contemporary Western styles. [They] contextualised Azerbaijani music within both East and West, uncovering its many historical and cultural links.¹ This is a very accurate description; Amirov seems to stand at a crossroads, both geographical and temporal, and creates from disparate cultural sources, Eastern and Western, music of remarkable freshness and originality.

Ivan Moody

¹ Aida Huseynova, *Music of Azerbaijan: From Mugham to Opera*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2016, p. 85

Kyiv Virtuosi Symphony Orchestra

Artistic Director and Chief Conductor: Dmitry Yablonsky



Photograph: Dmitry Frolov

Based in the capital of Ukraine, the Kyiv Virtuosi Symphony Orchestra has earned national and international recognition from both listeners and critics around the world as one of the country's leading orchestral ensembles. With an average age of 30, this youthful orchestra unites talented musicians from all over Ukraine, most of whom are winners of various competitions. The ensemble gained its reputation by popularising the music of Western composers in Ukraine, as well as enjoying a very close collaboration with outstanding contemporary composers such as Penderecki, Valentin Silvestrov and Myroslav Skoryk, among others. The orchestra's unique sound and virtuosity has led to many collaborations with internationally acclaimed soloists and conductors. The members of the Kyiv Virtuosi Symphony Orchestra bring their high level of artistry together with their Ukrainian pride to a wide range of audiences. Recent highlights include tours of Switzerland, France, Spain, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, and a concert series at the National Tchaikovsky Music Academy of Ukraine.

Dmitry Yablonsky



Photograph: Graziella Vigo

Dmitry Yablonsky, a GRAMMY-nominated cellist and conductor, was born in Moscow into a musical family. He began playing the cello when he was five years old and was accepted into the Central Music School for Gifted Children. At the age of nine he made his orchestral debut playing Haydn's *Cello Concerto*. Since then his career has taken him to some of the most celebrated stages in the world, such as Carnegie Hall, La Scala, Moscow Conservatory's Great Hall, St Petersburg Philharmonic Hall, Taiwan National Hall, Théâtre Mogador, Cité de la Musique and the Louvre, among others. As a conductor he has collaborated with many major orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra, Novaya Rossiya, Kyiv Virtuosi, Israel Symphony Orchestra, Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, Belgian National Orchestra, Antwerp Symphony Orchestra, North Netherlands Orchestra, Limburgs Symfonie Orkest, Russian State Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre National d'Île de France, National Symphony Orchestra, Taiwan, Catania Opera Orchestra, Holland Symfonia and the Orquesta Filarmónica de la UNAM (OFUNAM), Mexico. In 2010 Yablonsky received the Diploma of Honorary Academician at the Independent Academy of Liberal Arts at the Russian Academy of Sciences. He has transcribed and edited works for cello, which have been published by the International Music Company and Dover Publications. In 2008 Naxos released his recording of all 40 of Popper's *Études* for solo cello (8.557718–19), to critical acclaim. He teaches at the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music at Tel Aviv University, Israel and was appointed Head of International Relations in 2017. He is an enthusiastic and charismatic character that leads him to initiate many projects and organise many festivals. These events have taken place in a variety of countries such as Israel, Italy, Russia and the United States, and include the Qabala Music Festival in Azerbaijan and the Wandering Stars Music Festival in Israel, of which he has been artistic director since 2019. He plays two cellos, a Joseph Guarnerius filius Andrea and a Matteo Goffriller.

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Fikret Amirov is one of Azerbaijan's best-known 20th-century composers in the classical tradition, and the inventor of the 'symphonic mugam' based on traditional folk melodies (as can be heard on Naxos 8.572170). *Symphony 'To the Memory of Nizami'* reflects the character of the celebrated and influential Muslim poet and philosopher Nizami, who was born in the ancient city of Ganga in Azerbaijan. Amirov's skill in evoking fantastic worlds is heard in a suite derived from the ballet *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which this famous narrative about the seductive and perilous Orient resolves from a cinematic chase into a memorable love scene and final triumphant celebrations.



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Symphony 'To the Memory of Nizami' (1941)	21:42	7 III. Execution	3:02
1 I. Allegro maestoso	8:30	8 IV. Celebration	1:59
2 II. Allegretto giocoso	3:56	9 V. Sheherazade's Love Theme – Fairy Tales	3:09
3 III. Andante molto sostenuto	5:03	10 VI. Sheherazade's Triumph	2:58
4 IV. Allegro con brio	4:05	11 VII. Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves	1:32
One Thousand and One Nights – Suite (1979/2017)	35:38	12 VIII. Sadness of Sheherazade	1:39
(arr. Farhad Badalbeyli, b. 1947, Dmitry Yablonsky, b. 1962)*		13 IX. Chase	6:17
5 I. Introduction: Orgy	6:22	14 X. Interludium	2:25
6 II. Shahriar's Anger	2:24	15 XI. Shahriar and Sheherazade	1:57
		16 XII. Finale	1:50

*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

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